ARTISTIC STREET SIGNS

Revival of an Old Custom as Seen in Paris

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With Illustrations by the Author

WHO has not pored fascinated over old prints where the sign-boards of other days dangled above sculptured doorways? Who has not marveled at the quaint legends and the curious scenes depicted upon these old-time signs? Who has not thought of the street vistas and the interest of a walk through, as it were, an interminable picture-gallery? Who has not imagined, when the wind swept through the narrow, twisting alleys, these strange shapes of wood and iron, bumping and clacking one upon the other at the end of rusty chains, moaning and creaking like a ship's rigging in a tempest?

Besides their picturesque features, these signs were distinctly utilitarian, for in bygone days, when book-learning was not diffused as it is to-day, by their means alone the unlettered workman or the simple countryman could find his way about. The numbering of the streets and houses is of really recent date, and in those days it would have been hard indeed to have found an address without the aid of a distinctive sign-board. Indeed, so conspicuous a part did these play in civic life that many of the streets of Paris took their names from some well-known signs, as for instance the Rue du Dragon (Street of the Dragon), Rue de l'Homme Armé (Street of the Armed Man), Rue de l'Harpe (Street of the Harp) and the like.

Sixteenth-Century Wine Merchant's Sign. Now in the Musée Cluny

A Scissors Grinder—End of Eighteenth Century

In the middle ages there existed a fierce rivalry in signs, and each man tried to outdo his neighbor in imagining the strangest and the one most capable of attracting public attention. Some tradesmen went in for the witty, like the barber who put above his door: "*Demain on rasera gratis*" (To-morrow we shave free), others went in for the politic, as did the shopkeeper cited by Monteil, who during a siege of Paris, wishing to be on good terms with everyone, had a reversible sign painted, bearing on one side the inscription "*Vive le Roi!*" and on the other "*Vive la Ligue!*" Others again went in for the artistic, for we find to-day near the river a fruit store having above its door a bust of Molière flanked by heads of Comedy and Tragedy. Then there were the so-called "speaking" signs, designating better than words the trades for which they stood, a huge boot for the cobbler, a giant tooth for the dentist, a hat large enough for a Cyclop's head for the hatter.

Others again took the form of a rebus or a pun, as for instance, the letter A drawn above a hanche (*anse*), thus spelling A-ssur-ance; or a swan with a cross about its neck—*Cygne de la Croix* (Swan—or sign—of the Cross)—a sign by the way that greatly scandalized a seventeenth-century poet, who wrote: "Is it not a gross and criminal effrontery to paint a swan decorated with a cross, in order to make a ludicrous play on the Sign of the Cross?"

Taverns especially affected striking signs, and the fame of many an inn has become inseparable from its sign-board. The *pomme de pin* (pine-apple) gave its name to the celebrated cabaret near Notre Dame where Villon went to drink and where Rabelais wrote his epopee of Gargantua. At the Renard, near the Tuileries, Cyrano de Bergerac held forth. And who can dissociate the Epee de Bois (the wooden sword) in the Rue Quincampoix from the names of Racine and Marivaux?

Under Louis XIV a municipal ordinance made it obligatory that all persons, "of whatsoever quality and condition they might be," must place their signs against the shop walls. We cannot wonder at this decree when we think of people walking through streets where giant gloves and boots and heavy planks of wood hung dangling above their heads at the ends of rusty chains, ready like the sword of Damocles to drop at any moment upon the unwary passer-by.

Entrance to a Montmartre Show: "L'Enfer"

Sign by Robida on the Boulevard des Italiens

With this ordinance came the fashion for the truly pictorial signs—a vogue to which the best artists at times contributed their efforts. Until recently a white horse painted by Gericault hung over an inn door in the suburbs of Paris. Jean Goujon left us a "chaste Suzanne," a charming nymph whose grace and rounded limbs rivaled even his famous figures on the Fountain of the Innocents. Horace Vernet painted a number of signs, and Watteau is responsible for at least two, one of which is preserved and ranks as one of his masterpieces.

This remarkable sign-board of Watteau's was painted for a picture-dealer, Gersaint, one of Watteau's most intimate friends. It seems that one day the painter, prompted by a fit of gratitude, took a notion to paint a sign for his friend's shop, one of the best known on the Pont Notre Dame. That it might be properly noticeable, he took a canvas some five feet high and nine and a half long upon which he painted a scene representing the interior of a long gallery filled with visitors and pictures. To the left some men are placing two paintings in a packing-box; to the right, a well-dressed group is admiring an oval picture reminiscent of the artist's own work. Upon the walls hang canvases by celebrated painters whose style is so well imitated that one recognizes at a glance the Veronese, the Van Dyke, the Reni, the Ruysdael. We have Gersaint's own word for it that this remarkable sign was completed within eight days—the artist working only in the mornings; and Watteau himself says he painted the picture "just to limber up his fingers."

Willette's Sign in Stained Glass for an Antiquarian Book-Shop

No sooner was it put in place than the passers-by stopped, the connoisseurs gathered and discussed the gay masterpiece, and a rivalry ensued as to who should become its fortunate possessor. Gersaint, however, kept it for some years, until it was finally taken down and passed into the collection of M. de Julienne.

Many old signs remain in place in Paris to-day. On the Isle of St. Louis, the wanderer still may find some bits of wrought-iron worthy of a museum, and around the Central Markets the harvest is even more abundant. In the Rue Pirouette there is an amusing Angel Gabriel announcing not the last judgment, but the presence of an evil-smelling tavern. Who can tell what fantasy prompted the sign-painter to depict an angel, white-robed and white-winged, holding a bottle in one hand and a cup in the other? Snails, from being a favorite dish with the market-folk, are responsible for the many gilded specimens of their race that decorate the restaurants. On the quay near-by a "Bon Jardinier" (good gardener) leans upon his spade, doubtless dreaming of how he can excel Le Notre; while close at hand is perched a Coq Hardi—a brave rooster indeed, for he is crowing upon the back of a lion, whose hair stands on end with rage. Then there are the famous "*Chien-qui-fume*" (dog that smokes) and the "*Pied-de-Mouton*" (leg of mutton) and the "*Mortier d'or*" (golden mortar), just as they have been for centuries.

Balzac in his youth made a sort of catalogue of the interesting signs of his day which he published in 1826 in a tiny volume, a rare copy of which I found in the Bibliotheque Nationale. It bears upon its title-page, "*Petit Dictionnaire critique et anecdotique des Enseigne de Paris par un Batteur de Pavé*," and its dedicatory motto is the well-known adage, "*A bon vin, point d'enseigne*" (A good thing needs no advertisement).

In his preface, he notes the signs which, like our cigar-store Indians, denote without words the kind of shop in front of which they are placed, and they were made the same then as now: the shaving-cup or wig